

## The Process of Online Collaboration

All too often, when collaborative activity is included in an online course, the approach is simply to write the activity into the syllabus, form dyads or teams, and assume that the students will be able to take it from there. In our experience, however, this approach often leads to frustration and resistance on the part of the students. At the very least, an explanation of the importance of and reasons for including collaborative activity in an online course can help reduce resistance going into the activity and can contribute to the success of the activity. The following are the stages of collaborative activity as we see them, along with some suggestions for instructor involvement at each stage and ways to make collaborative activity work.

### THE STAGES OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration does not just happen. It takes planning and coordination on the part of the instructor to carry out collaborative activity successfully in an online class. Once the activity has begun, the instructor needs to stay present and involved in

order to assure that students will engage with one another in a meaningful way. Collaborative activity requires that instructors empower students to take charge of the learning process. Consequently, it is important, before incorporating collaborative learning into an online course, that an instructor do a self-assessment to determine just how comfortable he or she is with letting go of control. Self-assessment questions for reflection include the following:

- How much do I know about small-group dynamics? Do I know enough to be able to intervene in a group if the process is not going well?
- How will I need to shift or change my teaching style to enable collaboration to happen?
- How comfortable do I feel letting go of control and allowing learners to take charge of the process?

The responses to these questions can determine whether collaborative activity will succeed or fail in an online course. The instructor must act as a facilitator or guide, allowing students to create their own learning process as they move through the phases of collaborative activity. It is the outcome of that process that is most critical; how the students get there should be of minimal interest to the instructor.

The following are the phases of instructor involvement in collaboration, along with some tips for successfully navigating each phase.

### **Set the Stage**

Setting the stage involves a number of activities including providing an explanation of the importance of the collaborative work as well as clear guidelines for completing it. The results of case study research by Ge, Yamashiro, and Lee (2000) noted that student preparation prior to the engagement in collaborative activity significantly increases the cognitive achievement of participants. Preparation includes presenting an agenda and instructions for the activity as well as ensuring that students are comfortable with the technology in use. If students are clear about the nature of the activity and how they are to complete it, they are much more likely to pick up the gauntlet and move forward with minimal instructor intervention. The fol-

lowing reflection from a student after completing a collaborative activity illustrates the importance of setting the stage:

How did we do it and why were we so successful?

I think your expectations were clear, yet you left it up to us to figure out how to get the job done. Aside from producing the papers themselves, a key part of the assignment was to self-organize. Knowing that this was expected caused us to roll up our sleeves and pitch in from the very beginning. To me, this was probably the most important key to our success. In “real life,” so many managers express frustration over the fact that their people don’t self-manage, yet they fail to clearly express in the first place that this is expected. The fact that you assigned end results rather than “micro-managing” the process was also key; it is a style that too few are familiar with or comfortable adopting. *Julie*

### Create the Environment

In order for collaborative activity to happen well, students need to have a place to meet and know the parameters of how they should connect. In other words, does all activity have to occur on the discussion board? If so, will there be a space created for each group to meet privately? Are phone calls and synchronous chat sessions permissible means for working together? Are face-to-face meetings allowed? Will the instructor be a part of the small group somehow, either through observation or direct participation in activities such as synchronous chats?

All of these questions need to be addressed in preparing students for an activity to assist them in knowing where to go to complete their work and what the “rules of engagement” might be. Julie adds to our understanding of this concept through her continued reflection on her experience.

A logical framework was established early on in both assignments. The division of labor made sense and was fair, while creating opportunity for each of us to contribute in our own unique ways. Our individual commitments were strengthened by the fact that we all had a chance to weigh in on designing the process and to choose our respective roles. While there are some downsides to working asynchronistically (sp?) and

primarily in writing, it does offer a level of built-in accountability by having everything there in front of everyone, in “black and white.”

### **Model the Process**

The instructor cannot simply set up a collaborative activity and walk away from it, leaving the learners to fend for themselves. Brookfield (1995) notes, “Students will be highly skeptical of group discussion if the teacher has not earned the right to ask students to work this way by first modeling her own commitment to the process” (p. 5). We believe that this is true for any form of collaborative activity. By modeling collaborative behavior in the course and by allowing students to negotiate some of the parameters within which they will work with one another and with the instructor, the instructor demonstrates what good collaboration looks like. As another student reflects:

Last term I was more afraid of how I might be perceived when I posted my ideas on a topic or made a suggestion for action (in terms of organizing). I’m more comfortable now expressing my experiences and my ideas as well as suggestions for action and self-organizing. I’ve learned from watching others, reflecting upon other ideas, and that in turn brings out more of me. This group seems to share an openness and supportiveness to ideas and exploration and that creates a safe environment in which to wonder, offer ideas, and participate in further exploration. It makes collaboration easier and more inviting and therefore more likely to happen. Clearly the environment/container created [by the instructor] is an important factor for supporting and enriching collaborative efforts. *Judah*

### **Guide the Process**

Modeling the process is a first step, but the instructor’s responsibility does not end there. The instructor also has a responsibility to guide the process once it begins. Brookfield (1995) comments on this notion when he says, “A teacher cannot be a fly on the wall if that means being an unobtrusive observer. If you say nothing, this will be interpreted either as withholding of approval or as tacit agreement. Students will always be wondering what your opinion is about what they’re doing. Better to give some brief indication of what’s on your mind than to have students

obsessed with whether your silence means disappointment or satisfaction with their efforts” (p. 11).

When it comes to collaborative activity, letting students know in advance how the instructor intends to be involved with the process and how he or she plans to guide it gives them the sense of confidence they need to move forward. The following note of appreciation at the close of a class indicates the importance of instructor facilitation in meeting learning objectives. It is shared to indicate the results that can occur when an instructor’s guidance and modeling are successful.

Last but not least, Rena, our facilitator, coach, confidant, and instructor, you modeled for us. I can only imagine with your busy schedule and traveling what it must be like, but you always kept your sense of humor, you were kind and sympathetic about our problems, and led us with compassion. Your comments and participation with the class were always inspiring, very supportive, and made us reflect on what was going on, or what was said. It was a great class. Thank you. *Gabe*

### **Evaluate the Process**

The reflections from students that we have shared in the preceding sections of this list are snippets of evaluations of collaborative activities. It is important to include some form of evaluation at the close of any collaborative event or activity in an online class. This process allows the instructor to gain insight into whether the learning objectives of the specific activity were met and gives students the opportunity to debrief the experience. The final chapter has a more extensive discussion of how evaluation of collaborative activity can occur. At this point in our discussion, we want to emphasize two concepts regarding evaluation. First, student perceptions of the value of the collaborative activity they have experienced are critically important in determining the activity’s success or failure, and second, the emphasis in evaluation should be on the learning generated by the activity. Brookfield and Preskill (1999) comment that student self-reporting as a means of evaluating an activity is inherently flawed. However, they state, “When students regularly document their perceptions of the contributions they are making to the ongoing exchange of ideas, they can learn an enormous amount about the conditions and behaviors that make discussion successful” (p. 217). We believe that the same is true in terms of evaluating collaborative activity, and we strongly encourage

the inclusion of student self-assessment as a critical component of performance in an online course containing collaborative activity.

## **TOOLS FOR COLLABORATION**

Effective movement through the stages of collaboration can be assisted through the use of tools and techniques that support the development of collaboration. Many of these tools specifically support setting the stage and creating the environment within which collaboration can happen. However, the tools can also serve as part of the modeling process for collaboration. We have often discussed, for example, the importance of establishing guidelines for an online course. However, when a collaborative activity occurs within that course, a different and specific set of guidelines needs to be presented to students in order to set the stage successfully. Repetition and redundancy can ensure that students accept and assimilate the expectations for collaboration and interact with one another more effectively. In this section, we review four such tools for collaboration: explanations for teams, guidelines and expectations, agreements, and buy-in, with some specific suggestions instructors can use to implement these tools in an online course.

### **Explanations for Teams**

We cannot assume, as instructors, that our students will simply understand why collaboration is important. Often, students express resistance to participating in collaborative exercises due to past negative experiences wherein other students did not share the load, it was difficult to connect with one another across time zones, or because of the amount of work collaborative activity entails. Consequently, in setting the stage for collaborative work, the instructor can ease the degree of resistance in the group by simply explaining why the activity is occurring and how it contributes to learning objectives for the course. The following is an example of such an explanation to students. Our thanks to our colleague Cheryl Doran for contributing this example.

In this course, you will work individually as well as in teams of two. The intent of teamwork is to encourage dialogue and debate so that you will discuss issues in greater depth than postings to the CourseRoom allow. Learning can be enhanced when collaboratively constructing knowledge.

During the scope of this quarter, each dyad will engage in the development of an ongoing project—a simulated strategic-quality planning activity. The project is broken down into segments that are assigned on a unit-by-unit basis, building logically toward the final product.

The instructor will be developing dyads based in part on common interests and experiences. For that reason, it is particularly important that you post your personal profile as early in the week as possible. Feel free to contact each other once your information has been posted. When working in dyads, it is helpful to establish ground rules and expectations at the very beginning of the quarter. Here are a few points you may wish to discuss as you organize your working relationship.

1. Modes of communication.
2. Sharing of responsibilities.
3. Accountability. Think about what you value in terms of team participation. How will each of you be accountable? Promptness of response, notification of when a delay is inevitable, quality of contribution, and whether a team member participated in each team assignment might be some issues to consider. How will you assess your own participation?

Your instructor is available and very willing to help with your dyad process. Please ask for assistance, feedback, or support as needed.

### **Guidelines and Expectations**

We have already discussed the importance of creating guidelines for student participation in collaborative activity. The guidelines help both to set the stage for students and to create the container within which the collaborative activity will occur. The following suggestions for instructors, contributed by one of our learners who teaches online (Dell, 2004), can assist instructors in developing collaborative learning activities and help learners to work effectively in activities that involve online collaboration. Attention to all of these issues should help to ensure success in collaborative work. Dell's suggestions have been drawn from the work of Johnson and Johnson (2000), Kagan (1994), Palloff and Pratt (2003), Millis (n.d.), Bailey and Luetkehans (1998), and Ko and Rossen (2001), as well as from her own experience.

- Explain the importance of collaborative group work and make it a requirement of the course—not an option. Although some learners tend to prefer to work alone, allowing them to do so reduces the likelihood of a meaningful learning experience.
- Form groups that are heterogeneous with respect to gender, age, ethnicity, learning styles, abilities, and experiences. Groups of two to four learners are best. Instructors and designers should consider the purpose of the group and the cooperative structures that will be used as they determine the number of teams.
- Allow time for ice-breaking and team-building activities, which allow learners to begin to form a sense of community. The activity may be a specific team-building structure or it may simply encourage students to introduce themselves to one another.
- Give clear instructions and guidelines regarding not only the assignments, but also the method and tools of communication that will be used. Start simple to give students time to understand the structures and methods of communication.
- Set reasonable goals and provide a place for the group to interact. Many course management systems provide areas intended solely for this purpose. The tools available, such as asynchronous group discussion boards, live chat, and interactive white boards vary with the course management system chosen.
- Supervise the group's progress and be available to prompt or assist groups that are having difficulty. Your “presence” will help to ensure participation by all members. Be prepared to intervene and mediate conflicts of an interpersonal nature without taking sides. Suggest that the group explore alternatives and reach consensus.
- Design evaluation criteria to include peer evaluation. This rewards extraordinary team members while at the same time appropriately evaluates non-contributing members.
- Provide a place for the team to share their work and learning products with the larger learning community. Many projects can be posted on a Web site or added as an attachment to a discussion thread.



## Agreements

The use of “team charters” or agreements has been noted to be of significant importance in promoting learner satisfaction with collaborative learning experiences online (Doran, 2001). A team charter serves as an agreement or contract among members, outlining how they will interact together, determining the roles each member will play in the collaborative activity, and creating benchmarks and deadlines for the completion and submission of collaborative work.

Generally speaking, it is a good idea to assign the completion of a team charter early in a course where collaborative group work will be used, or at least as soon as groups are formed, so that it can serve to guide the activities of the group. A requirement of the charter activity should be posting the charter online so that team members can refer back to it, edit it as necessary, or amend it as conditions change. Providing sample team charters assists the group in understanding the concept and in the development of their own charter. The following are a few simple guidelines for the creation of team charters that work well to get students started:

In order to make group work successful, all group members must agree to abide by norms established by the group. As your group is forming, please reach consensus on the following items and post your group’s charter to the main discussion board:

- *How will your group identify itself?* Your group may choose a name under which to function.
- *How will the group communicate?* For example, through the discussion board, e-mail, virtual classroom, phone, or a combination of methods?
- *What day during the week will the discussion begin?*
- *How quickly should group members be expected to respond to e-mails or discussion board postings?* For example, within twelve hours, within one day, and so on.
- *What role or duties will each person in the group perform?* Possible roles include initiator, secretary, liaison to the instructor, motivator, organizer, and so forth.
- *Who is responsible for posting group responses to the main discussion board?*

- *How will the group handle a member who is not participating?*
- *Discuss any other topics that are unique to your group.*

The following is an example of how the development of a team charter might be included in the syllabus of an online course:

We will work together to jointly develop a Team Charter for the course. A charter will clarify our purpose, identify our deliverables, define our responsibilities (operating guidelines), and bring us together as a team. It will also help us monitor our results and evaluate our progress. (We will revisit it in Weeks Four, Eight, and Twelve.) We will build the charter around three headings: purpose, deliverables, and operating guidelines. The statement of purpose is a single sentence outlining why we are here. The statement of deliverables is a bulleted list (five to seven items) describing the results we want to achieve. Operating guidelines define how we will work together and how we will treat one another; it will be in the form of a bulleted list of five to seven items, each starting with the word "we." Use the following headings to develop your posting. Keep the process simple. It should take you no longer than a half-hour to do this. Also, while working on this, designate one person or two people to pull the charter together to be circulated to and approved by the rest of us. Someone may choose to volunteer for this role or you may negotiate it among you. If nobody steps forward, I'll be forced to "volunteer" someone in the group, but I suspect that will be unlikely!

Here are the headings:

- Our purpose is to (answer in one sentence)
- Our deliverables include: (answer in five to seven clear, concise bulleted statements)
- Operating Guidelines: (answer in five to seven clear, concise bulleted statements beginning with the word "we." For example, We complete postings on time.)

Your posting is due Friday at midnight Pacific time. I will create a folder labeled Team Charter for this purpose.

### **Buy-in**

The team charter process helps to ensure buy-in from all members of the team. Through the negotiation process with one another, the group members form a contract for their learning. Should a team member not fulfill that agreement, it then becomes the responsibility of the instructor to follow up with that learner and remind him or her of the agreed-upon responsibilities and tasks.

When a team charter is not used, it is still possible to use other means by which to get learner buy-in. The syllabus should be constructed with enough detail and description of collaborative activities so as to serve as the foundation for how that activity will occur. Asking learners to signal their agreement to the syllabus at the beginning of the course can also serve as a contract between instructor and learner and among learners. In addition, individual learning contracts can engage learners in a negotiation process with the instructor by which they agree to fulfill all responsibilities of collaboration as a part of their overall learning for the course.

Regardless of how it is accomplished, a contract for collaborative activity should be established so that if a student begins to neglect his or her responsibilities to the team, the instructor can intervene and remind that student of the agreements made at the beginning of the course.

Although the use of the collaborative tools just presented can help to ensure the successful outcome of collaborative activity, life does intervene and problems can and do occur. In the next chapter, we explore the issues and concerns that can interfere with successful outcomes of collaborative work and make suggestions for interventions.

### **SUMMARY POINTS TO REMEMBER ON THE PROCESS OF ONLINE COLLABORATION**

- In order to achieve successful collaborative activity, attention needs to be paid to the four phases of activity: set the stage, model the process, guide the process, and evaluate the process.
- Before including collaborative activity in an online course, the instructor should conduct a critical self-reflection to determine how comfortable he or

she truly is with this form of activity. An instructor who is less comfortable with empowering students to take control of their learning process is less likely to experience success in collaborative work.

- By utilizing tools such as explanations for teams and team charters, the instructor can effectively set the stage and model the process of collaboration online.
- Effective buy-in for collaborative activity can occur by using the tools to set the stage and can create a contract for collaborative activity.
- Do not assume that students will jump at the opportunity to collaborate. Instead, anticipate that they will be resistant and use measures to counter that resistance, such as explanations for teams, early on in the course.